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In tough times, look for sales in new places

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Today's sales climate is perhaps the most challenging in years. Sure, that makes your life difficult. It also wreaks havoc with your competitors, who may be struggling to hit quotas, slashing budgets or even closing up shop.

Now is the time to go on the hunt for new prospects. But you must build on your typical sales strategy by looking for business in unexpected places and unexpected ways. Times have changed. Have you?

- Hunt with job hunters. The market is saturated with job hunters who no longer have a vested interest in their past employers. As you network, seek out former employees of your competitors and leverage their knowledge.
- Flock with birds of a feather. Look for people who sell to the same market as you and start a lunch group.
- Open doors with closed doors. As competitors go out of business, their clients will seek out new vendors. Are you calling on the customers of your weakest competitors? Now is the time to develop relationships.
- Keep a wide-open mind. Don't rule out getting involved with any kind of organization. A few years ago, I attended a luncheon hosted by the D/FW National Association of Women Business Owners. Today, I'm the only man in the country to sit on a local NAWBO board, and more than half of the board members are my clients.
- Build relationships — even with competitors. In reality, you can help your competition. Even better, they can help you. Some of my best lead generators are sales training companies that provide in-house training to large corporations. They often refer business that is too small for them, and I gladly return the favor by referring leads that don't meet my criteria.
- The 3-foot rule. Sales is not a 9-to-5 job. Whenever you get within 3 feet of someone, ask, "What do you do?" You'll be amazed how many of these people either become customers or introduce you to potential customers. For example, I joined a private country club. I would ask the pro shop manager to pair me with golfers I did not know. Frequently, I would play golf with other CEOs for four hours. Some of those CEOs became clients and are still using my services.

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